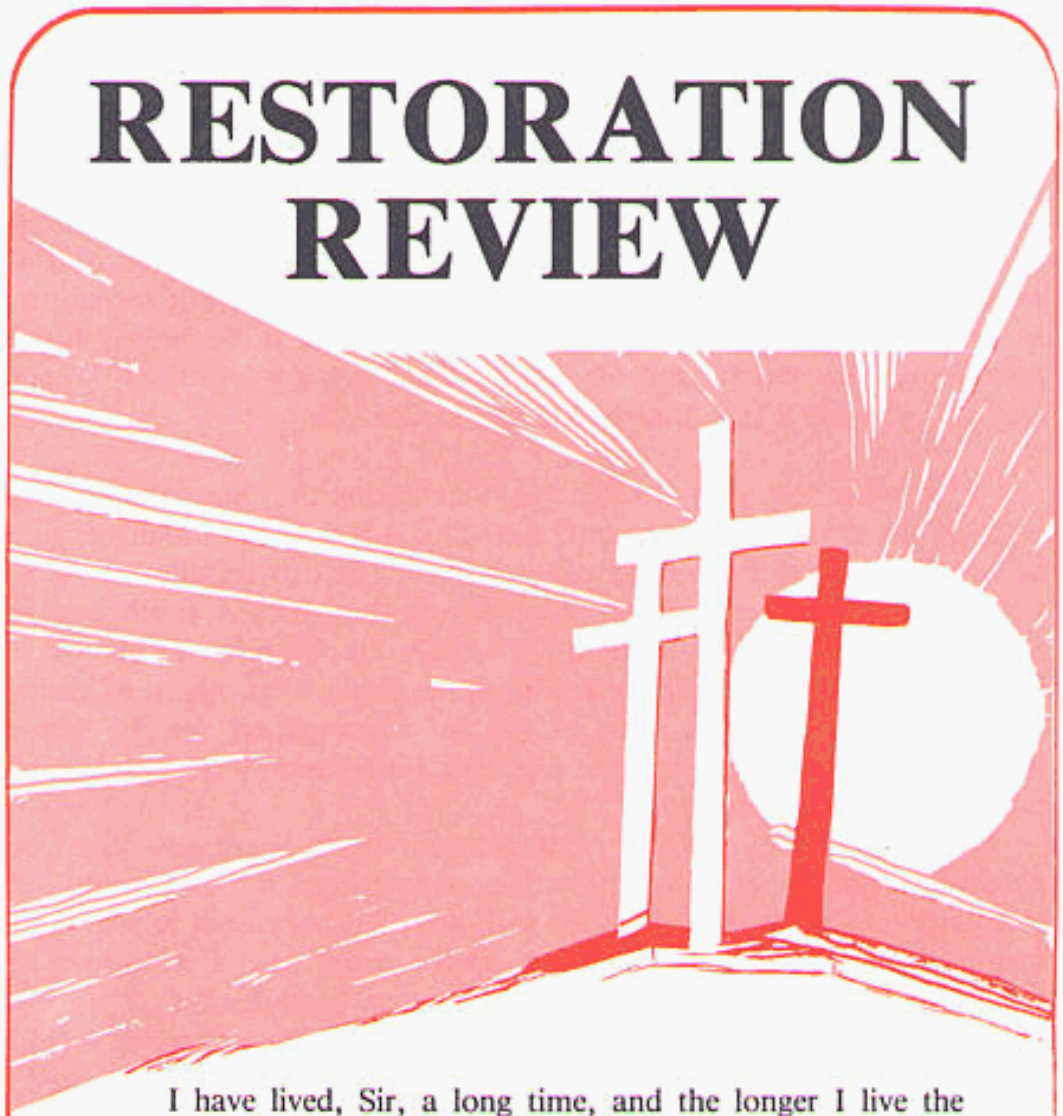
RESTORATION REVIEW



I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live the more convincing proofs I have of this truth — that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings, that "except the Lord build the House they labour in vain that build it." I move, therefore, that these proceedings begin with prayer to God. — *Benjamin Farnklin, before the Constitutional Convention, Philadelphia, 1787.*

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The Bible and the Constitution

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The Sense of Scripture: Studies in Interpretation . . .

THE BIBLE AND THE CONSTITUTION

The provisions of the Constitution are not mathematical formulas having their essence in their form; they are organic living institutions transplanted from English soil. Their significance is vital not formal; it is to be gathered not simply by taking the words and a dictionary, but by considering their origin and the line of their growth - Oliver Wendell Holmes, 30 years a U.S. Supreme Court justice.

That we as a nation are this year celebrating the Bicentennial of the birth of the Constitution of the United States is reason enough for us to be more aware of that grand old document. In this installment of our study of Biblical interpretation, I am saying that there is another reason for studying the Constitution, especially problems related to its interpretation: *it helps us in interpreting the Bible.* This might, of course, be said of any book, or even of the daily newspaper, for the way to interpret the Bible is not all that different from the way we interpret any other rational communication.

But the Bible and the Constitution have likenesses that lend particular significance to any principles of interpretation they might have in common. They both have to do with law. They are both related to the direction of a new nation. They both create new institutions and ordinances and lay down principles for their preservation. They both recognize a dependence upon "the Laws of Nature and Nature's God" and look to ideals that reach beyond time and place. They both abound in ambiguities, which makes differences in interpretation a certainty. They both defy a final and absolute interpretation. And yet because of their living principles they both adapt themselves to changes in culture and circumstance and thus remain relevant for all time. What they both mean ultimately in any given circumstance can be determined only by an appeal to a final authority, the Supreme Court of the United States on the one hand and the conscience of the individual on the other. In the case of the Bible that means that each person must serve as his own "Supreme Court," since no one else can decide for him.

The impressive quotation above from Justice Holmes points up the parallels that can be drawn between the Bible and the Constitution. What Holmes says about the Constitution can be said of the Bible. Like the Constitution, the Bible is not simply words and its essence is not its form, however impressive these may be. To be sure, the Bible is history, poetry, geography, biography, and all the rest, but it is more than this. It lives. It is vital. Its principles and ideals are eternal.

Holmes insists that you are not to interpret the Constitution simply by taking its words and looking them up in a dictionary. You must look at their origin and what has happened since. They are to be interpreted in terms of the ongoing life of the nation. So with the Bible. Its meaning often goes "beyond the sacred word" of lines upon a page to the living situation in diverse cultures and varied circumstances. If the Constitution is to be interpreted so as to guide the United States in a nuclear age, the Bible cannot be confined to the culture of the first century but made relevant to our modern, complex world that has become a global village.

It might even be said that both the Constitution and the Bible were miracles in their origin. Both George Washington and James Madison spoke of "the miracle at Philadelphia," and when one considers the odds that the 55 delegates at the convention had against them of ever producing such a document he may agree that "miracle" is not too strong a term. They were divided between north and south, between east and west, and between planters and businessmen. Slavery was already a divisive issue and some demanded that the Constitution address the problem. The small states were suspicious of the larger ones, and they were all suspicious of powerful governments, having recently gone through the Revolutionary War. They were reluctant to create a strong central government - "Federalism" they called it - and so they were divided between Federalists and anti-Federalists. And yet they agreed that something had to be done, for the old Articles of Confederation, which was then the law for the thirteen colonies, were woefully inadequate. Each state believed it was sovereign, and it did not want to yield its power to a central government, which was of course necessary if they were to have a republic.

They met in secret, kept the windows closed even during the hot summer lest someone eavesdrop, and stationed a sentinel at the door. Their ground rules were calculated to preserve order. The delegates could not talk to each other or pass notes when a delegate had the floor, and no delegate could speak twice on the same issue until all had spoken who desired to. No delegate was to breath a word about what went on, not even after the Constitution was at last ratified. In fact it was 50 years later when James Madison, who took notes on the procedures with incredible exactness, at last revealed the details of what took place and who argued what. His account revealed that about a dozen men did most of the work, and he himself had such influence in the creation of the final product that he came to be known as "the Father of the Constitution." A few delegates did most of the talking and there were a few who never said a word in the entire four months of debate. Now that *is* a miracle! But then again, with James Madison sitting there, I don't think I would have said anything, either!

James Madison was something else. While Thomas Jefferson (and John Adams too) was conspicuous by his absence, serving as he was at the time as minister to Paris, he was present in the person of James Madison, whom he plied with scores of letters and hundreds of books from European libraries in preparation for the Convention. No prize fighter was ever as

prepared for a contest in the ring as Madison was for the crucible in Philadelphia. He was well read on the rise and fall of ancient empires, the history and nature of government, and political philosophy. He was so small of stature that he might have been mistaken for a clerk, but he stood tall at the Convention, not only for his superior knowledge but also for his tenacity in argument. Still he was known for his sweet disposition. And he was in later years to become an admirer of Alexander Campbell, whom he often heard preach, describing him as the ablest expositor of the Scriptures he had ever heard. And he was destined to be our fourth President.

Even with the help of Madison the Convention during its first weeks got nowhere. Factions threatened to destroy it. It was at this point that Benjamin Franklin, who at 81 was the oldest delegate among comparatively young men (average age, 43), reminded George Washington, who sat as president, that when they were at war with the British "we had daily prayer in this room for the divine protection." God heard and answered those prayers," he told the delegates, and "Have we forgotten our powerful friend?," he asked them. He went on to make one of the greatest statements in American history and one that throws light on what the Constitution means to us, if, as Justice Holmes says, it is to be understood in the light of its origin. Addressing the chair, Franklin went on to say:

> I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth - that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings, that "except the Lord build the House they labour in vain that build it." I firmly believe this.

That is the spirit of the Constitution, a reliance upon and a belief in "the Law of Nature and Nature's God," as our forebears put it in the Declaration of Independence. That is why this nation eventually gave women their right to vote and the black people their civil rights, even though our nation 200 years ago was male-dominated and white- dominated. When the Supreme Court in 1896 ruled in favor of the "separate but equal doctrine, which forced some of our citizens to use separate facilities only because of the color of their skin, there was a lone dissenter on the Court. Justice Harlan wrote in his dissent: "Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens." He went on to say that to deny a black person his God-given rights is hostile both to the letter and the spirit of the Constitution.

We know that the Supreme Court in 1955 proved Justice Harlan right, that the Constitution *is* color-blind, and since then black and white children can go to the same school and drink from the same water fountain. There are millions of Christians in this country who believe that eventually the Supreme Court will correct another grave injustice, the *Roe v. Wade*

decision of 1973 that stands as a threat to the life of every unborn child in this nation. Abortion on demand is wrong because it is against the spirit of the Constitution and the Law of Nature and Nature's God.

I am saying that we are to interpret the Bible like old Ben Franklin and Justice Harlan interpreted the Constitution, *by the spirit of it.* The spirit of the Constitution is justice and equality; the spirit of the Bible is the meekness and gentleness of Jesus Christ.

Justice Felix Frankfurter, who sat on the Supreme Court for 23 years, provides another parallel between interpreting the Bible and the Constitution: "We interpret the Constitution not only by reading the Constitution but by reading life." Reading life! We learn what the Bible is all about not only by reading its pages but by reading life as we find it in our time. We visit the shut-ins and see what it means to be lonely. In the nursing homes we see despair, in the streets we see drug addiction, in our schools we see teenage pregnancy. In the world at large we see terrorism, political intrigue, and a nuclear arms build-up capable of destroying mankind.

Only when we read our world do we really understand the significance of Jesus' great invitation: "Come unto me, all of you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am gentle and lowly of heart and you shall find rest for your souls" (Mt. 11:28-29).

There is one important difference between the Constitution and the Bible in terms of interpretation. The Constitution is an "Article I, Section 1" type of document, and so there is no question as to how old one must be to serve as President, who has the power to "lay and collect taxes," or who is to serve as President of the Senate. The Bible is not that kind of book, *usually,* especially in reference to the nature and work of the church. There is not even uniformity among the various congregations set up by the apostles. We therefore have a questionable hermeneutics if we try to make the New Testament into a "blueprint" type of document. When this is done one only imposes his own opinions as laws. The question of a precise "order of worship," the election and tenure of elders, or whether singing must be acappella (or whether any congregational singing at all) would be examples.

And yet both the Bible and the Constitution are basically *principle* documents that endure the ages because of their openness. The purpose of the Constitution is to "establish justice" and to "promote the general welfare," but these terms are kept ambiguous, for there is no attempt to spell out in detail everything that these principles include. And so any citizen may insist that if a law or practice is unjust and contrary to the general welfare it is unconstitutional, and he has the right of redress in a court of law.

Is it not true also of the Bible? Jesus came to bring the abundant life, and to insure this he laid down commandments and principles, and I Jn. 5:3 says, "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments, and His commandments are not burdensome." The first principle of the Bible is the principle of love, and so all commandments emanate from the love of God. And so no commandment of God can be grievous or burdensome, which would make life more difficult and make the abundant life impossible. And so when anyone would impose his opinion on us, such as some of the man-made rules on divorce and remarriage ("Since you did not have a 'scriptural' reason for your divorce, you can never marry again"), we can reject such legalism as against the spirit of the Bible.

In the Bible we have the principle of equality of all who are in Christ, such as Gal. 3:28: "In Christ there is neither male nor female." And so any interpretation about the place and ministry of women in the church must yield to that principle. What are we saying about the principle of equality when little boys can pass out visitor's cards in church but not little girls, and when the church's decision-making process is all male? Indeed, when the Churches of Christ are even more male-dominated than the Roman Catholic church are we not neglecting the weightier matters while we tithe mint, anise, and cumin?

And the "rule of elders" has become so authoritarian among us that we are in the throes of a leadership crisis, one sign of which is numerous lawsuits across the country. Much of this is due to the arrogance of power assumed by elderships and the willingness of the people for it to be so. Again, in interpreting the role of our leaders we must be a *principled* people - think in terms of principle. And the principle here could not be clearer. When Jesus spoke of such authoritarian rule among Gentile kings, he said to his disciples: *It shall not be so among you* (Lk. 22:26). Jesus goes on to identify the leader as a servant. Any interpretation of "the eldership" that sees elders more like corporate executives than humble shepherds is contrary to the spirit of the New Testament and is therefore suspect.

The Constitution binds us to certain norms and yet it refrains from being so precise as to restrict those norms to any particular time or circumstance. We are protected against "unreasonable searches" and "cruel and unusual punishment," but what is unreasonable, cruel, and unusual? Because of its deliberate ambiguity and latitude the Constitution remains applicable to changing conditions. And yet this lends itself to varying interpretations. Even the justices differ on what the Constitution means. But is this not necessary with a document designed to "secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity"? The Constitution gives Congress the power "to regulate commerce," but its authors had no way of anticipating the complexities of international commerce now faced by their posterity. So they kept the principle open and avoided being specific.

Is it not the same with the Bible? The Sermon on the Mount cannot be interpreted exactly the same way in every generation, and yet we believe that "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" is applicable to all ages, but not in exactly the same way.

Finally, we might point to the 26 amendments to the Constitution and conclude that the Bible needs no amendments, and in a sense this is true. But amendments to the Constitution are hardly more than a continuing interpretation, so as to apply the spirit of the Constitution to the needs of a changing society.

While we do not make amendments to the Bible, are we not continually researching all sorts of data so as to determine not only its original meaning but how it applies to our nuclear-computer age? Who reads an old version of the Bible anymore or an antiquated commentary? What happens to the preacher or teacher who can't progress beyond the 1940's?

You will pardon me if I have overworked the parallels I see between interpreting the Bible and the Constitution, but one point in all this is basic and crucial: *any two documents that have survived for centuries in guiding a nation or a people will be interpreted similarly.* This is because they cannot simply be rule books, for as such they would not have survived. Nor can they be confined to any one age. It is living principles that give them life century after century.

Jesus sought to impress this upon the Pharisees when he pointed to the way they handled the Bible: "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me" (Jn. 5:39). They were abreast of all the details and all the rules, most of which were their own assumptions, but they missed the point of the Scriptures, which was Jesus Christ.

So, as citizens of our great nation we look to the Constitution, the point (spirit) of which is equality and justice for all. As a people in covenant relation with God, we look to the Bible, the point (spirit) of which is Jesus Christ.

Or to put it another way, as Christians we are to be *principled* people, a people who think, interpret, and act in terms of principles. And *the* principle for us is Jesus Christ. It is in the light of that living principle that we are to interpret the Scriptures. — *the Editor*

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"YOUR BROTHER, NO QUESTIONS ASKED"

A recent letter from Cecil Hook of New Braunfels, Tx., who writes frequently for this journal, concluded with these engaging words, "Your brother, no questions asked." Knowing the kind of questions Cecil can ask, it is just as well that our fraternal relationship does not depend on my ability to provide the right answers to his questions. He was telling me that he

accepted me *as is*, that he had no test for me to take. That I limp along as a faltering disciple of Jesus is enough for him. He loves and accepts me *unconditionally.* I don't have to be good and I don't have to be right. That I am his brother, a child of the same Father, is enough for him.

In my search of ways to capture in few words the essence of unity and the meaning of brotherhood I have not been able to do better than the way Cecil put it. Let us print them on our signs and proclaim them to our communities: *We accept you as you are, no questions asked!*

People who have been rejected by other churches because they are divorced would be accepted as is, no questions asked.

People who have been driven from other churches for being "in error" on this or that doctrinal point would be accepted as they are, no questions asked, for we are all "in error" on some things.

People of unsavory reputation, whether because of dope, crime, or prostitution, would be received on the basis of the love and mercy of God, no questions asked.

People who are poor, unwanted, unemployed, and unclean would be accepted as is, no questions asked.

This means that we would have but one "test," if it could be called a test, and this is commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord, or an interest in the claims of Jesus as Lord.

It is not our mission to lay down tests and issue examinations. It is not our business to sit in judgment on people's lives. It is not our concern how many times they've been married or whether they have ever taken bankruptcy. We do not have to meddle in their private lives. We are to be their servants for Jesus' sake, and we are to witness of the mercy of God and the love of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are not to be dispensers of the law but ministers of the gospel. We are to be the Body of Christ upon earth that welcomes the oppressed and the weary and not some private club where only the cultured and the affluent feel comfortable.

No questions asked, only a way of life to be shared. That's not bad. That puts us in company with the primitive community of Christians that had but one concern, sharing the common life in Christ. That by the way is what fellowship means: *sharing life in Christ together.*

Jesus told that great story of the wayward son who at last made his way home, broken and disgraced, only to be received by a forgiving and loving father. And he told the story to show us how God loves. The father was too busy showing mercy to ask questions.

The Pharisees may have expected Jesus to conduct an inquisition when they brought an adulterous woman to him. But Jesus had no interest in either asking questions or passing judgment. He shared with her God's forgiveness.

This is our task as Christ's church. To concern ourselves with love, mercy, and forgiveness does not mean that we take people's sins lightly or that we in anyway approve of the way they are living. Nor does it mean that we are not to preach repentance. It only means that when lost and suffering humanity look our way they should see the grace of God. It is, after all, the goodness of God (that people see in us) that leads them to repentance, according to Rom. 2:4.

Needless to say that there are yet many among us who are not as open as Cecil Hook, who will accept even me, no questions asked. If I draw only from information that has come through recent phone calls, there is the instance in a Nevada church of a sister who was withdrawn from because she worked in a casino. The church rescinded its decision when her lawyer wrote and kindly requested that they consider her rights as a person, only vaguely alluding to possible court action. In the same city four sisters in a Church of Christ were required to make confession for speaking up in a Bible class. One wonders how a sister can even make a confession if she cannot speak at all. Another brother called to tell how he suddenly became *persona non grata*, including having his class taken from him, when he failed to answer some doctrinal questions in the right way. It is not uncommon for Christian Church folk to relate how they were beautifully accepted in a Church of Christ *until* some questions were asked and it became known that the church they came from has instrumental music. Sometimes people are rejected because they are too friendly with "liberals" or because they dare to visit a "denominational church."

Some churches go so far as to draw up a list of questions for those who would be teachers. I will forever admire J. W, Roberts of ACU, who is now deceased, for writing in the *Firm Foundation* that such a practice is creedal and sectarian and should be abandoned. But the classic response came from a sister in Dyersburg, Tn., who, when she was confronted with such a questionnaire, asked *What grade do I have to make to pass?*

The one test that we should each give ourselves is, *what would Jesus do?* Or better still, *what has he already done for us?* If he came into this world to question all of us and to judge us on our answers, then we have no hope. If we have to be good or perfect or right, then there was no reason for him to die on the Cross. This "test" lies behind the principle of acceptance that Paul gives in Rom. 15:7: "Receive one another as Christ has received you, to the glory of God." That says it all, and that is the only "test" we need.

How did Christ receive you? Was it not on the basis of love, mercy, and grace? That is how we are to receive others. And when we do that, the apostle assures us, it is to the glory of God. If we accept people only when they agree with us, it is to our vain glory and not the glory of God.

When we love and accept each other as sisters and brothers, no questions asked, it glorifies God, Rom. 15:7 is telling us. That is because we do it out of our love for God rather than the love of some party. *—the Editor*

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ESPECIALLY FOR MEN: HOW TO DEAL WITH LUST

Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You. — Ps. 119:11

It is common for righteous men, especially when they are writing their autobiography, which often takes the form of a confession, to tell on themselves in reference to how lustful they have been. St. Augustine was one of these.

Ouida and I remember a brother in a congregation we attended, the preacher in fact, who was always confessing his lust, which in his case was sexual lust. There are of course other kinds of lust, which may be even more serious, such as lust for things or revenge or power or money. But for this brother, as for men generally, it was women, and it was probable that he would make some reference to his besetting sin whenever he addressed the congregation. Sometimes he would not spare the details, and with his wife sitting there before him. One time Ouida's mother was with us when he made our small church his confessional and she afterwards commented, "I felt sorry for his poor wife sitting there," which was probably the sentiment of us all. Some sins are best confessed to God and God alone.

If we had a way of determining the sins that beset Christians the most, I would guess that for women it is the disinclination to forgive some past injury, insult, or rejection, including those heaped upon their children. While men also have a problem in forgiving those who sin against them, they have a greater problem with lust. But unless they are "saints" (in the sense of being unusually righteous) they are not likely to admit even to themselves that they have this problem.

If we are to deal with lust effectively, we must first understand what it is and what it is not. If we confine the definition to sexual lust, we are to understand that it is not simply "looking upon a woman" as is often implied by preachers who emphasize those words when

they quote Jesus' injunction in Matt. 5:28. Jesus' words should rather be emphasized this way: "Whoever looks upon a woman *to lust after her* has *already* committed adultery with her *in his heart."*

There is nothing wrong in looking at a woman and enjoying her beauty, just as there is nothing wrong in beholding the beauty of any of God's creation. It is the lusting that is wrong. And this is not simply a passing sexual thought, which may be inappropriate but not lust. This is the distinction Martin Luther sought to make when he said it is one thing when birds fly over our head but another thing when they make nests in our hair.

Lust has no respect for its partner and is concerned only for its self-gratification. It conjures in its mind what it would do physically and thus *uses* the woman's body for its own selfish ends. It is mental manipulation of another human being, a kind of passive rape in that it is without the person's consent. It is as impersonal as being "serviced" at a filling station. Lust is voyeurism that makes the mind a desert. Malcolm Muggeridge said it well when he observed, "People now seem to have sex on their minds, which is a peculiar place to have it."

Lust is wrong, indeed one of the seven deadly sins according to the medieval theologians, because it seeks gratification without involvement. It blinds the mind to respect for persons and to the joy of meaningful sex. It is insidious in that it is a private and secret sin, and since it is not actually physical it deceives one into supposing that it is not so bad.

We take the first big step in dealing with lust when we face up to the fact that it is a weighty sin. It is the sin that led to the fall of Jim Bakker and his PTL empire, and it is the sin that caused the destruction of Billy James Hargis' ministry. In the case of Hargis, who at the time was president of a small Baptist college, he was "found out" when a couple on their honeymoon, both graduates of said college, confessed their unfaithfulness, both of them naming Hargis as the partner. Whatever else may be said about homosexual acts, as well as much heterosexual conduct, it is enough that they are born of lust rather than committed love.

If we allow lecherous thoughts to dominate our minds it is just as well that we not pass judgment on the likes of Bakker and Hargis. A man that will use his wife's body while in his heart he commits adultery with another man's wife, which sex therapists assure us is not uncommon, may commit a greater sin in God's sight than the perennial womanizer who is more open in his transgression. The ancient Roman sages knew how to make merchandise of lust, for they would advise their clients that if they could not have the girl they wanted (or the boy since homosexuality was common) they only needed to use the body of a slave and let imagination in the dark do the rest. And is not a woman unfaithful to the marriage covenant when she allows lust for another man to rule her heart while her husband makes love to her? Jesus teaches that when the mind is so enslaved the person has *already* committed adultery in his heart.

So, we deal with lust by coming to terms with it as a serious, degrading sin. It is not a sin to be winked at. We must come to loathe lascivious thoughts in our mind as we would cancerous cells in our body. This we do when we desire purity of heart more than the spoils of lust. To Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish religious philosopher, this is the essence of Christian character: *purity of heart is to will one thing*, which was the title of one of his books. He meant that the Christian is to have one great desire in life, purity of heart. While he realized that only God provided the grace for a pure heart, he understood that we must want it and we must will it.

Ah, there's the rub! Do we really want purity of heart? Perhaps that is why David was a man after God's own heart - not that his heart was all that pure, but he wanted to be pure. We are blessed when we hunger and thirst for righteousness, even if it seems we never quite attain it. We have the upper hand in our struggle against lust and all other sins of the mind when we have a deep and sincere longing for purity of heart.

Equally important is that we ply our minds with good thoughts when evil thoughts threaten to invade, When lust knocks at the door of our mind, we can turn it away by drawing upon great truths from the Psalms, such as:

"Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You." (119:11)

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxieties, and see if there is any wicked way in me; and lead me in the way everlasting." (139:23-24)

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer." (19:14)

"How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word." (119:9)

We can take refuge in the promise of 1 Cor. 10:13 that God is faithful and will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to bear, and will with the temptation provide the way of escape. His word is the way of escape. In temptation we can turn to the power of God's word for strength, as Jesus did when he drew upon Scripture in confronting Satan. If we will saturate our minds with those four passages from the Psalms, committing them to memory and making them our heart's desire, we can ward off Satan and his demons of lust and lasciviousness. It is "the way of escape" that the Bible promises, and it is ours if we want it. When Jesus resorted to God's word, never turning loose, Satan gave up on him and departed. If we resist him with God's word in our hearts he will also leave us. If he is overly persistent in his assault, rebuke him and order him to leave, like Jesus did. Satan will not get far with us if we keep saying and keep practicing that great line from the one who was a man after God's own heart: "Your word I have hidden in my heart that I might not sin against you." The way of escape!

There is also prayer, soul-searching prayer, and much could be said about the power of prayer in combating sins of the mind, which are more devastating to the soul than sins of the flesh. But there is one important principle of prayer: *be honest with God.* Another principle is to be specific, and that means to name the sin and even the person or persons we sin against in our heart, calling the name or names before God, and asking for forgiveness for sinning against them. And pray for the renewal of the mind by means of God's mercy and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Pray for purity of heart and for victory over the demon of lust.

Victory will not come easily nor swiftly. It may be a long struggle and to some degree a lifetime struggle. What is important is that sin lose its dominance over us, as Paul urges in Rom. 6:12 "Do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you obey it in its lusts." It is a matter of who is in charge and who is obeyed. It is expected that lust will hang around, all our lives in one way or another. We must keep him off the throne of our hearts.

John Calvin's wisdom is appropriate in this regard: "It is better to limp along the path of God's Word than to dash with all speed outside it." — *the Editor*

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I JOINED A CHURCH

Cecil Hook

One cannot join the Lord's church. When the people on Pentecost were baptized for the remission of sins, the Lord added them to his church. Those people did not have to decide which church to join, for the Lord added them to his one and only church. There was no worry about being made a part of the wrong church. The Lord's church is not a denomination, sect or division, for following the Bible will not make anyone a member of such. The gospel makes Christians only, and one must go beyond the Scriptures to make one a sectarian, denominational Christian. By the same procedure through which people are saved, they are added to the one undenominational church of Christ. Those in the Church of Christ have never joined a church, but the Lord added them to it when he saved them. Therefore, we can be sure that we are not sectarian or denominational Christians.

Countless times throughout my years of preaching, I offered my listeners some such explanation as I have given in the preceding paragraph. It seems not only true, but the only answer to the problem of division. This is the only way that we can all be one in the same church. That plea is so simple that even I had moderate success in convincing others that it is God's way.

A person who is logical enough to form the above statement should be logical enough to see its weakness; however, it took me many years to come to recognize the overly simplistic nature of the explanation. If the Lord adds us to the one Church of Christ (or, church of Christ, if you prefer), which is not a sect, division, or denomination, how do we explain the many divisions among the churches of Christ? How does one get into one of the various groups who are dissociated from one another? Did the Lord add me to one of them, all of them, or none of them? When I obeyed the gospel, the Lord added me to his one church which happened to be non-instrumental, post-millennial, and non-charismatic, and made use of multiple communion cups, Sunday School, women teachers, and orphanages. I never sought out such a church and did not apply for membership in it. I was just added to it, sort of automatically!

Others obeyed the same gospel and were added by the same Lord to his one church which happened to use one cup and deplore Sunday School and women teachers, a group which dissociated itself from the one I was in. These disciples had taken no steps to join a division any more than I had.

Still others obeyed the same gospel and were added by the same Lord to the same church which happened to use instrumental accompaniment to singing. Those people took no steps to join a sect, but remained in the church the Lord had added them to. Both of the former groups refused fellowship with this instrumental Church of Christ.

Then there were those who obeyed the same gospel and were added by the same Lord to his one church and found themselves to be in the Christian Church instead of the Church of Christ! They joined nothing and I joined nothing, but we wound up in different disassociating groups. Surely, God moves in mysterious ways, doesn't he?

The truth may reveal that many other persons obeyed the same gospel and found their membership to be in groups with still other names.

We are not questioning that the Lord added all these people to his one church, but somebody joined a sectarian division also. Who was it? "Not I!" we hear from each one involved. While I was a teenager, my grandfather spent one summer with us. When he had married, he was illiterate, but his bride taught him to read, using the Bible as her textbook. His conviction was that we should not divide the assembly into classes. But he would go to class each Sunday, sitting in the adult class. When I questioned him about it, Grandpa explained that he did not go to classes. He just went to the assembly and the other people divided it by going to classes. That's the kind of explanations that we have made to justify our alignment in different exclusive sects of the Lord's church. We are in the one the Lord added us to and it is others who have divided from us! As the cat gave out a loud "meow," the mother yelled, "Tommy, stop pulling that cat's tail!" "I'm not pulling it, Mother," he protested, "I'm just holding it; he's doing the pulling!" None of us wants to take the blame.

One can join a group without applying for membership, being voted on, or conforming to any formality of recognition. When I was added by the Lord to his one church as a boy, I then joined an exclusive group in the church universal by my presence, participation, and support. No application of membership was made and no formal acceptance by the group was made, but the fact that I had become a part of that church which disassociated itself from other people whom the Lord had added was *understood.* If I had, as a professing Catholic, come into the group by presence, participation, and support, I would have experienced silent rejection, if not formal rejection. A Catholic could not have joined. But as a baptized believer, my joining was verified by congregational acceptance, "unofficial" as it might have been.

The same procedure prevails in the various divisions of the Lord's church. We join them. Even though it is still true that the Lord adds us to his church when he saves us, he does not add us to one of our sectarian divisions in the Church of Christ. Isn't it time for us to recognize that, to eat our humble pie, and to confess, "I joined the Church of Christ of which I am a member!"?

After you were baptized and added by the Lord to the group that you are in without your joining it, could that group later withdraw fellowship from you? Well, yes! If they disfellowship you, they operate on the *understanding* that you are a part of that church. Somehow, you got into it, and it is less than the entire body of those added to the church by the Lord.

If you ever moved to another place, very likely you "placed membership" with a church in your new community. That is a ridiculous term, as though membership is something you can put somewhere, a term invented to avoid using the term "join the church." The Scriptures do not even speak of "members of the church." We don't "join the church"; we just "place membership!" By such action after you were baptized, you definitely identified yourself with a church that did not recognize all others in the body of Christ; hence, you joined a sect.

While we are confessing, should we not go ahead and admit that we are aligned with a sect? Any group that refuses to recognize and accept others whom the Lord added to his church, as we have practiced in creating our divisions, is a sect. Who can deny that we meet that definition? And when we give ourselves a distinguishing name, we denominate ourselves. That's a hard admission for an exclusivist to make.

Is there a solution and remedy for this deadly disease? Ideally, we would all be able to agree on all points of doctrine and practice and be one in the most literal sense. That is both improbable and impractical. It has never been and there is little prospect that it will ever be. I question that Jesus had that in mind when he prayed for our unity, for he knew that we are humans rather than angels.

The Scriptural and practical solution is for us to quit judging others in Christ who hold differing views from ours and to accept them as brothers equal before the Lord. No one must compromise his convictions; all do not need to meet in the same congregation; and all do not have to believe and practice in total conformity. But all can love one another, accept each other, and work together in serving our heavenly Father.

Sectarianism is not so much the meeting in separate groups as it is a judgmental spirit. Each can have his own convictions of faith between himself and the Lord (Rom. 14:22), but he fails to discern the one body when he judges his brother while continuing to commune (1 Cor. 11:29), and thus he eats and drinks damnation to his soul. In view of our practice, that becomes very frightening.

Some earnest disciples start new groups in an effort to be nonsectarian and non-denominational. I can appreciate that fully. But why start a new group when there are already other non-sectarian, undenominational churches in your community? Why not join one of them? "I do not agree with their doctrine and/or practices," you reply. Then just how non-sectarian is your group if it refuses fellowship with others who make the same claim that you make? You start another denomination when you start a group which must distinguish itself (denominate itself) from other non-sectarian churches. If non-sectarian, non-denominational churches are truly that, why do they not all unite - including the various Church of Christ groups who make that claim? "Non-denominational" churches become "non-denominational" denominations!

I joined a church. The Lord added me to his church and then I joined a local fragment of the universal church by my identity with it which implied that I was part of it. The Church of Christ with which I presently associate would be generally characterized as judgmental, exclusivistic, and sectarian in spirit, and many who compose it hold convictions different from mine. While being a part of that group, I disavow what I consider as error; I cultivate an accepting, non-sectarian spirit, and I seek diligently to correct those evils which make the local group sectarian and denominational. I do not know what course I, or anyone else, can take that will be more remedial of our ills. All churches need reform, but only the Savior can remove the candlestick. Epistles were written to bring about correction and reform in churches, but in no epistle were disciples told to leave a church and start a pure church. — *1350 Huisache, New Braunfels, TX 78130*

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OUR CHANGING WORLD

Letter About Russia

To The Editor:

Thanks for the clipping from Stefan Bilak about Mr. Gorbachov and current trends in Russia. I have been very much heartened by both my trips there, to see to what a great extent Christianity is a vital force in the lives of so many of the people. I at tended services in many churches while there, in a number of different Cities. Always, the churches were packed with two or three thousand people, and they stand for three to four hour services. I am convinced that the attempts to kill the church in Russia has caused it to become much stronger than ever, just as it did in the times of the Roman empire in the early days.

I believe that the political situation in the world today demands that we stop thinking of the world as divided into two hostile camps, each trying to overcome the other to become the ruling power on the earth. Rather, we should be working to overcome hostility and suspicion with friendship and mutual trust. It is apparent that for many years the governments of the USA and the USSR do not trust one another. Unless we try actively to overcome this mistrust, it clearly will not go away.

Concerned citizens must find ways to break down this cynicism and suspicion. Many concerned groups in the USA are trying to provide ways for Americans to become better acquainted with Soviet citizens. For Christians, the obvious way is to begin such a process through the churches in both nations. There are said to be about 55 million Christians in the Soviet Union.

It is my opinion that the Communist leaders of the Soviet government have finally realized that they cannot destroy the Church, and that efforts to do so are a waste of resources. They certainly know that their system is not working in many important ways, and they also know that they must make great changes to prevent widespread unrest among their people.

Recently, the following statement was made by Mikhail S. Gorbachov (Quoted in the Moscow News, 14 Dec.1986):

"We are all in one boat, whether we like it or not, it is essential that we learn to Co-exist, to live in peace on this tiny and very fragile planet. Our nuclear age of growing economic and political interdependence rules out the security of one nation to the detriment or at the expense of the security of another nation. I shall repeat once again; together we shall either survive or perish. Security nowadays can only be mutual, based on a universal model. We are all different, each professing different ideologies, political systems, and following one system of

religious belief or another. Nevertheless, we are all very dependent on one another today. Hence, we should think differently. We should vigorously search for new ways of building new international relations."

Of course, most Christians in the Soviet Union are members of the Orthodox Church. As you probably know, the Orthodox Church believes that only it has preserved the apostolic faith in its purity, without admixture of heresy, from the first century to the present day. Since about 1960, when the Orthodox Church in Russia began participating in the World Council of Churches, many of its leaders have gradually begun to realize that the things Christians are united about are far more important than are the things over which we differ. Consequently an understanding of the universal fellowship of Christians throughout the universal church, regardless of denominational background is rapidly spreading in all ecumenically minded denominations. As I am sure you know, although the Roman Catholic Church has many persons who actively work in efforts of the World Council of Churches, the Roman Church itself is not a member. Consequently, the Roman Church still considers most of us to be "officially" heretics. But, this too is changing. —*Comer Shacklett, Westfield, NJ.*

Our 35th Anniversary Edition

Leroy and Ouida Garrett

Ouida believes editors should rarely publish their pictures and that of their wives even more rarely, and this is rarely enough: our 35th anniversary of publication. Perhaps it is appropriate for you to see (for the last time) what we look like. We began as *Bible Talk* in October, 1952, and changed the name to *Restoration Review* in 1959. We agree that it has been a work of faith, a labor of love, and a glorious experience. We realize that the curtain must soon drop, but we want our last years — live more (?) if the Lord wills, which would make 40 years! — to be the most productive of all. And so we are resolved to follow Christ more nearly, know him more clearly, and love him more dearly. And may that resolution be evident in what we yet have to say, and there is yet a great deal that we have to say. You can help celebrate our 35th by sending in a list of new subscribers. Praise the Lord! - *the Editor*

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BOOK NOTES

Beginning New Testament Study, by Bruce Chilton, in a non-technical way explains what the New Testament is, how it was formed, and how we can better understand it. It deals with the culture in which it was written and the problem of applying ancient documents to modern culture. $10.50 postpaid.

Robert Schuller's *The Be Happy Attitudes* has lots of good stuff, including interesting stories and illustrations. Its theme is eight positive attitudes, based on Jesus' beatitudes, that can transform your life. It has lots of impressive insights, such as, "If you think you're a total failure remember this: Your greatest successes will forever remain God's secret." $12.95 postpaid.

Harry Boer's *A Short History of the Early Church* is a fascinating presentation of the church's history for the first four centuries. You learn about Gnosticism, Marcionism, and Montanism, along with how the canon was formed, the persecutions, Constantine and Augustine, the works, and all in less than 200 pages. $7.50 postpaid.

Amy Grant's *Heart to Heart Bible Stories* are taken from both Testaments and are delightfully illustrated. The children will love these stories. And we have a special price of $9.00 postpaid.

Ouida and I have evening readings with Mother Pitts and we are presently reading William Barclay's *Hebrews*, which is one of the 17-volume set of Daily Bible Study of the New Testament. These include Barclay's translation of the text as well as commentary. These are highly informative and edifying. We recommend them for family devotions. You can start by ordering one volume, such as *Mark* or *Romans.* We use the soft cover edition which are only $7.50 each, postpaid. The complete set is $115.00

Many of our readers have received a free copy of *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, by Leroy Garrett, a history of Christian Churches-Churches of Christ, by sending us a club of eight subs, new Or renewal (including your own), at $3.00 per name, $24.00 total. We believe you will be delighted with the book and you will introduce this journal to new readers. Or you can purchase the hook outright for only $21.95, and we pay the postage when you remit in advance. The responses to this history book Continue to be enthusiastic and Sometimes extravagant. We would like for you to be the judge by reading it for yourself.

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